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ABSTRACT

The practice profile is a standardized, systematic, cost-effective tool for summarizing the components and requirements of a program in a manner that permits comparison with other programs or selection of discrete components from various programs. It provides a component checklist, a precise list of implementation requirements, and a system for assessing practice characteristics such as complexity, purpose, and prescriptiveness. These three parts--component checklist, implementation requirements, and practice characteristics--are described in detail, with illustrative tables. Information is also provided on how to collect data for practice profiles and on various ways in which they have been used. The final section provides a seven-step procedure for constructing a practice profile: (1) orientation to practice, (2) interviewing the developer, (3) interviewing users, (4) observing users, (5) developing a preliminary checklist of components, (6) verifying checklist with the developer, and (7) pilot testing and revision. Implementation requirements include training, startup costs, equipment needs, personnel needs, and logistics, while practice characteristics include purpose, concreteness of benefits, pedagogical approach, precision of definition, prescriptiveness, and complexity. (TE)

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THE PRACTICE PROFILE: AN ALL PURPOSE TOOL FOR PROGRAM COMMUNICATION, STAFF DEVELOPMENT, EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT

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The Practice Profile: An All-Purpose Tool for Program Communication, Staff Development, Evaluation and Improvement

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"The program sounds promising, but I wonder what it looks like in practice."

"Of course I could evaluate it, if only I knew precisely what's supposed to happen when it's being used."

"I wish I knew what was expected of me, if I'm doing this new program right."

"Now that I have all the test scores back, I'm wondering what was really going on in each setting to make the scores so different."

Nothing blocks communication, inhibits evaluation, hampers staff development, and thwarts improvement more than a program that is not clearly defined. Yet fuzzy, ambiguous practices abound. They are clear only in the minds of their developers and take on different forms whenever and wherever they are used.

It is not simple to define a program or practice (we use these words interchangeably) so that what it looks like and what it requires are clear. Too many "what if's" exist. "What if it is used in a different setting?" "What if there isn't a separate facility?" "What if there isn't a full-time instructor?" It is also difficult for people too close and commited to a new program, such as its developers, to be objective about its components, clearly describing what they are and how they should look.

For a recently-completed study of federal school improvement strategies, we used a special technique to operationally define 62 innovative practices so that we could see how they were implemented in schools and institutions across the country, and then try to understand what factors facilitated and inhibited their use. The technique was used to develop Practice Profiles which provide a standardized, systematic, cost-effective way to summarize program components and requirements. In this paper we describe Practice Profiles and suggest a procedure for developing one.

The Need

Programs are described in many ways -- sometimes by the goals they espouse, by the outcomes they achieve, or by the facilities, equipment and training they require. Other times they are

characterized by approach or underlying philosophy: "diagnostic/prescriptive," "compentency-based," "humanistic," "individualized." All of these descriptors give us a sense of what the practice is (or is not), but they hardly help us picture it in action. They do not help us understand what we might do to implement the practice, nor give us guidance in what to look for to evaluate it. We are forced to make leaps of faith that a program is being implemented when people say it is, and we can be of limited help in improving program use.

For several years, researchers and evaluators have acknowledged the need for defining the treatment, the practice whose effects they are studying[1]. The solution has been elaborate systems to analyze program components, minutely specified and monitored through time-consuming observation procedures. While these are quite useful to researchers, they are not for program managers. They are often too expensive to develop and use, requiring additional expertise and considerable time investment. Often too, although it may be highly accurate in its description of a single program, the resulting system does not facilitate comparison with another program. The description is not standardized -- what are components for one program are behavioral indicators for another; one program description may have 50 elements, another may have six. It is impossible to compare one practice with another, either for research purposes, or to help potential adopters make wise selections.

In 1976, staff at the Texas Research and Development Center for Teacher Education developed a concept called Innovation Configurations[2] which postulated that teachers adapt and modify innovations, changing them significantly from the developer's idea of how they should be used. These adaptations could (and should) be described by using an Innovation Configuration Checklist which operationally defined each component of the innovation and variations of the components. A process for developing such a checklist was outlined and used in several research studies and monitoring efforts by program managers and evaluators.[3]

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[1]Leinhardt, G. Modelling and measuring educational treatment in evaluation. Review of Educational Research, 50:3, 393-420.

[2]Hall, G. & S. Loucks. Innovation configurations: Analyzing the adaptation of innovations. Austin, TX: R&D Center, University of Texas, 1978.

[3]Research and Development Center for Teacher Education. Assessing program adaptation during implementation: Concepts, strategies and issues. Austin, TX: R&D Center, University of Texas, 1981.

In 1978, The NETWORK was funded to investigate several federal dissemination strategies that supported school improvement through the implementation of new practices. Working with the R&D Center, we developed a tool called Practice Profiles to define t... 62 practices selected for study (see Figure 1 for a simplified example). Practice Profiles differed from the previous work in several ways. First, it standardized the format in such a way that components of one practice could be compared to components of another. This made statistical analyses, necessary in research and evaluation, possible. It also enabled individual projects to compare their practices with others, through the standardized descriptions, and potential adopters could easily look across several projects. We also envisioned, and are currently developing a "component bank" which will allow projects to describe themselves by borrowing instead of creating their own component descriptions (much less time-consuming). The bank will also facilitate potential adopters' selection among various practices, by allowing them to access descriptions of several that meet their special needs.

The second way Practice Profiles differed from previous descriptive work is that their development rests solely on the developer's perspective of the practice. Research and experience had told us that school improvement efforts benefited from a clear, concise image of what a practice should look like: teachers and instructors want to know what's expected of them, evaluators and researchers want to know what to look for. The developer's perspective provided a useful framework for clarifying practice expectations, allowing us a measure of fidelity as well. Furthermore, our procedure did not eliminate the possibility of describing user adaptations, so the Practice Profiles had the ability to be descriptive as well as evaluative.

Finally, the Practice Profile is more than a checklist of components of the practice. It does include a component checklist, but it also provides a precise list of implementation requirements, especially useful for potential adopters to know what they would need to do before implementation, and need to have to support it. In addition, the Practice Profile includes a system for assessing practice characteristics such as complexity, purpose and prescriptiveness. The characteristics we include, listed later, are ones that research has shown to make a difference in whether and how new practices get implemented. With the three kinds of information available from the Practice Profiles, consumers can make wiser selections. They offer a form of quality control, of "truth in packaging."

Anatomy of a Practice Profile

As pointed out in Figure 1, the Practice Profile has several parts. The component checklist identifies a manageable number of components -- usually between six and twelve. Each component is described behaviorally, what someone actually does. Variations

FIGURE 1

PRACTICE PROFILE: ADULT BASIC SKILLS PROJECT (ABSP)

PART 1: COMPONENT CHECKLIST

Component 1: Diagnosis			
(1)	(2)	(3)	
Instructor diagnoses student reading and math levels using ABSP Competency Tests.	Instructor diagnoses student reading and math levels using procedure other than ABSP Competency Tests.	Instructor does not diagnose student student reading and math levels.	
Component 2: Instructional Program			
(1)	(2)		
Instructor designs an individualized program for each student based on entry level skills.	Instructor does not design an individualized program for each student based on entry level skills.		
Component 3: Use of Materials			
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Instructor designs program for each student utilizing ABSP materials keyed to student level and enriching with wide variety of other materials.	Instructor designs program for each student utilizing only ABSP materials keyed to student level.	Instructor designs program for each student utilizing materials other than ABSP materials.	Instructor designs program for students without using materials.
Component 4: Instructor Role			
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
During student work time, instructor acts as facilitator assisting students individually when asked, and convening small groups of students with common skill need for direct instruction.	During student work time instructor acts as facilitator assisting students individually when asked, but never instructs students in groups.	During student work time, instructors usually instructs students in groups or lectures to all students together.	During student work time instructor is not available.

CODE: ____ Variations to the right are unacceptable; variations to the left are acceptable.
– – Variations to the left are ideal, as prescribed by the developer.

PRACTICE PROFILE: ABSP (con'd)

Part II: Implementation Requirements

1. Costs

   Start-up: $3,000 (program for 100 students)
   Continuation (Yearly): $50 per student
   (Note: this is without adding staff.)

2. Training: 2 weeks for staff before implementation; two 2-day follow-up sessions over first year.

3. Materials/Equipment: ABSP Reading and Mathematics Curriculum Guides (one per student).

4. Personnel: No additional staff required. Instructor needs usual skill in teaching adults; knowledge of basic reading and math skills.

5. Organizational Arrangements: Requires a classroom where workspace and materials may be available at all times for students. Needs to be open at convenient hours.

Part III: Practice Characteristics

1. Purpose: Basic Skills Development

2. Pedagogical Approach: Diagnostic/Prescriptive

	low	(circle one)			high
3. Concreteness of Benefits Comments:	1	2	3	(4)	5
4. Precision of Definition Comments:	1	2	3	(4)	5
5. Prescriptiveness Comments:	1	2	3	(4)	5
6. Complexity Comments:	1	(2)	3	4	5

describe differences from the developer's perspective between ideal use of each component, acceptable use, and unacceptable use. Lines on the checklist separate these three categories. There can be any number of variations in each category, or there can be none. For example, there is no acceptable variation in component 2 in Figure 1; either you use it ideally or unacceptably. Components that have no unacceptable variations are not required, since they can be used in any way or not at all.

Note that components do not describe requirements for implementation such as training, facilities, personnel or equipment. These are described in the next section of the Practice Profile. This is because components must describe the practice in use. What do you see happening when it is being used? Merely having had training, or having the right materials, personnel or facilities, does not necessarily mean anything is actually being done, that people are actually behaving in defined ways.

There are two kinds of checklists that can be developed. The first, which we have used most often and find most valuable, is focused on the user, who is the subject of each component (e.g. "the user tests . . .", "the user groups students . . ."). This kind of checklist can be used to monitor individual use through completing one for each user.

The other kind of checklist focuses on the practice as a whole. It is most useful for more complicated practices where there are people in several roles. A practice focused on job training, for example, involves counselors, trainers, administrators, and teachers, each of whom behave in different ways in use of the program. Here it is possible to create a user-focused checklist for each role which, while the number of actual checklists makes it cumbersome, still lends itself to monitoring individuals. Or one checklist might be constructed to combine all roles -- this is the one we call practice focused. While less cumbersome, this can only be completed once for the project, or for each team if there are more than one, but not for each user. This type of checklist does have utility for complicated practices, especially for communication purposes (i.e. describing the practice to new audiences). Figure 2 is a simplified example of a practice focused checklist.

The remaining parts of the Practice Profile, illustrated in Figure 1, are a listing of implementation requirements, which are self-explanatory, and an assessment of practice characteristics. Definitions and decision rules for assessing practice characteristics are not included here, but are available elsewhere.[4]

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[4]Because study reports are currently in final preparation, readers desiring more information should contact either of the authors directly.

FIGURE 2
PRACTICE PROFILE: JOB SKILLS TRAINING (JST)

PART 1: COMPONENT CHECKLIST

Component 1: Diagnosis		
(1)	(2)	(3)
During the first visit, a counselor interviews student for job goals and administers the JST Job Competency Test.	During the first visit, a counselor interviews student for job goals and administers a test of job skills other than the JST Job Competency Test.	During the first visit, a counselor does not interview student for job goals and/or does not administer a test of job skills.
Component 2: Instructional Program		
(1)	(2)	(3)
Instructor develops an individualized program for student based on job goals and entry level job competencies.	Instructor develops an individualized program for student that ignore job goals and/or job competencies.	Instructor does not develop an individualized program for student.
Component 3: Work Mode		
(1)	(2)	(3)
Students come and go freely to Learning Center, working on the materials prescribed in their program at their own pace, assisted by monitor upon request.	Students come and go freely to Learning Center, working unassisted on the materials prescribed in their program at their own pace.	Students come to Learning Center at assigned times, work on their own program at a pace set by instructor.
Component 4: Monitoring		
(1)	(2)	(3)
Instructor and counselor both monitor student progress by meeting as a threesome once a week and formally testing progress in competency acquisition at least once a month.	Either instructor or counselor monitor student progress by meeting with student once a week and formally testing progress in competency acquisition at least once a month.	Student progress is not monitored at all, or it is monitored through either meeting or periodic tests of competency acquisition, but not both.

CODE: —— Variations to the right are unacceptable; variations to the left are acceptable.
– – Variations to the left are ideal, as prescribed by the developer.

Collecting Data for Practice Profiles

As we describe later, Practice Profiles are constructed by or with the developer of a practice. Information about components, implementation requirements and practice characteristics come from interviews with the developer, reading of print materials, and observations of the practice in use.

Once constructed, the component checklist may be completed for each individual user (or in the case of the practice-focused checklist, for the project as a whole or teams of users with different roles). The most common way of collecting data is through interviews with users. They are first given an open-ended question, asked to describe their use of the practice. After the response, the interviewer probes any of the components that were not described.

In some cases it is preferable to observe users to assess component use validly. This is especially the case when instructor-student interaction is involved, for example, when a certain ratio of instructor talk to student talk is required.

After data from users are collected, either by interview or observation or both, the information is summarized on the component checklist by circling the one variation for each component that best describes the use being made of that component.

Uses of Practice Profiles

Projects across the country have used Practice Profiles in many different ways[5]. Project directors include them in overviews conducted for potential adoptors, decision makers (e.g., School Boards, administrators), and community groups. They are used by staff developers in training and follow-up assistance to users.

Evaluators use them as checklists to assess implementation and to explain differential outcomes. Facilitators of several projects, such as those in the National Diffusion Network, use them to monitor adoptions so that they can make decisions about resource allocation. Instances of each of these uses indicate that Practice Profiles have proven a valuable tool.

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[5]Projects referred to here include those using profiles constructed in The NETWORK study as well as other developed by projects themselves or with assistance from The NETWORK or Texas R&D Center staff and training cadre.

As noted earlier, we used Practice Profiles to conduct research on implementation. We interviewed 296 users (mostly teachers) of the 62 practices and completed a component checklist for their current use of the practice. We then asked what they had been doing with each component before the practice was adopted, and we completed a checklist on their past use. Thus we could assess the amount of change they had made. Because we also knew the developer's ideal image of each component, we could also assess fidelity for each user (i.e., how far he or she was from ideal use) as well as initial change required (i.e. the difference between what the person had been doing before adoption and what the developer expected).

Other parts of the Practice Profile allowed us to compare practices in terms of complexity, implementation requirements, goals, etc. This helped us understand how factors such as these influence implementation and the success of new programs.

How to Construct a Practice Profile

We have found that developers have difficulty profiling their own practice, since they are often lost in the details and rarely objective. We suggest that someone else assist, either as the one responsible for ultimate completion of the profile, or as simply a sounding board and helper in analysis. In cases where the profile will be used for research or evaluation purposes requiring quantitative analysis, we encourage interaction with a trained and experienced profile developer.

The most complicated part of the Practice Profile is the component checklist, which we discuss first. There are seven steps in developing a component checklist.

Step 1: Orientation to Practice. Gather written materials describing the practice, such as brochures, training guides, descriptive articles, instructor and student materials, or proposals. Skim these to identify possible components. The following categories of components developed from our set of 62 checklists may be helpful in discerning important elements of the practice you are desribing:

1. use of specific materials or content
2. user-student interactions
3. instructional activities
4. testing or screening
5. recordkeeping

6. scheduing or pacing

7. sequencing

8. grouping strategies

9. coordination activities.

Step 2: Interview Developer. Several questions help gain information about a practice to help identify components:

1. What do users do?
2. What do students do?
3. Describe a day/week/year in the life of a user.
4. What would I see if I visited a user site?

Ask about components identified in the printed material. Probe about which components must be present for the practice to be "in use."

Next, ask about variations. Ask about ideal use of each component, and what might constitute unacceptable use. Would it be okay not to use any component?

Step 3: Interview Users. Talking to users of a practice is an excellent way to understand how it works. Interview one or more users, asking questions such as:

1. Describe how you use the practice.
2. What are you doing during its use?
3. What are students doing?
4. What are some other ways you have seen the practice used?

Then ask the user how he or she uses each component identified in the developer's interview.

Step 4: Observe Users. Whenever possible, visit classrooms or other settings where the practice is in use. Look especially for how each component is varied.

Step 5: Develop Preliminary Checklist. Construct a checklist from the information gained in Steps 1-4, using the standardized format (see Figure 3). Consider these guidelines:

1. There should be 6-12 components. Each component should be able to stand alone, able to be extracted from the practice and adopted by itself. Components should be of equal size and complexity, not ranging from minute behaviors to complicated interactive processes.[6]

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[6]Here we must acknowledge a dilemma about how "big" a component is. When developing several checklists, it is useful to be able to compare across practices and possible to describe components of equal "weight." In developing single checklists, when the number of components exceeds 12, either you are being too minute in description, or your practice may actually be more than one. Consider both possibilities. This dilemma may in part be solved by the use of the "component bank" mentioned earlier.

Example:

Component: Student Sign-In

	(1)	(2)
Too Small:	Students formally sign in and out at each visit to the Center, simulating a work environment.	Students do not formally sign in and out at each visit to the Center.

Component: Instructional Program

	(1)	(2)
Too Big:	Instructors test students using ABSP Competency Tests, assign materials based on test results, monitor progress using ABSP post-tests, and redesign instructional program.	Etc.

2. Use brief names for the components; avoid unfamiliar terms, if possible.

Examples:

Good: Component: Diagnosis

Component: Recordkeeping

Component: Team Coordination

Bad: Component: Use of JST Competency Tests, JST Post-Tests, JST Recordkeeping System and JST Progress Charts

Component: Student Change

Component: Reading Matrix

3. When writing a variation, always have a subject (the user should be the subject, not the students) and an action verb. Be as concrete as possible about the expected behaviors.

Examples:

Good:

(1)

Instructor designs on individualized program for each student based on entry level skills.

Bad:

(1)
Students work on their own individualized program.

(1)
Instructor designs an appropriate program for students.

4. Make variations mutually exclusive; i.e., for each component there is only one variation that best describes a particular user.

Examples:

Good: Component: Pacing

(1)	(2)	(3)
Instructor allows all students to pace themselves.	Instructor determines the pace for some students, giving assignments and deadlines; other students are allowed to set their own pace.	Instructor determines the pace for all students, giving assignments and deadlines.

Bad: Component: Pacing

(1)	(2)	(3)
Instructor determines pace for students who have problems scheduling themselves, giving them deadlines for assignments.	Instructor allows students who can schedule themselves to set their own pace.	Instructor determines pace for all students, giving assignments and deadlines.

5. Always have a variation that says "not used" for every component (see Figure 1).

6. Consider having an "other" category for each component for unanticipated variations.

Step 6: Verify Checklist with Developer. Interview the developer once more to gather information about additional components or variations, clarify items that are unclear, and check that the ideal-acceptable-unacceptable distinctions are correct.

Step 7: Pilot Test and Revise. Try out the checklist by interviewing a user and completing a checklist. This is the best way to determine whether variations are well differentiated and capture real-life behaviors. It also helps identify other common variations that may have been overlooked. The component checklist is now complete.

Two other parts remain to constructing a complete Practice Profile. As noted on Figure 1, implementation requirements are also included. To identify these, first peruse the written materials. Then, in the developer's interview, ask about:

1. Training requirements, preservice and inservice: length, content, expected outcomes.

2. Cost of start-up for an adoption site, both money and in-kind contributions.

3. Materials and equipment needs.

4. Personnel needs: instructors, aides, coordinators, tutors, etc.

5. Facilities, time and special scheduling needs.

The final part of the Practice Profile is an assessment of practice characteristics. For our own research, the following characteristics were included: purpose, concreteness of benefits, pedagogical approach, precision of definition, prescriptiveness and complexity. We developed a list of purposes (e.g., remediation, personal development) and pedagogical approaches (e.g., diagnostic/prescriptive, experimental) and characterized each practice. For the other characteristics, we used a numerical scaling of high to low, judging each practice relative to the others. Since this part of the profile is most useful for research purposes, we refer the reader to another source for more detailed information.[7]

Practice Profiles are a useful tool for a variety of purposes, among them evaluation, staff development, research and dissemination. Although not a simple task, development of a profile for each program of significance would go far to promoting understanding and effecting quality control, benefiting developers, adopters and consumers alike.

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[7]See Footnote 4.